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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000470

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Background on long-standing tensions between eastern and northern Tamils

Refs: Colombo 465, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Since his split with the LTTE, rebel commander Karuna has made a big pitch that eastern Tamils have been mistreated by the main LTTE organization in the north. In wider societal terms, it is true that there have been long-standing tensions between eastern and northern Tamils. Often from a higher Hindu caste, northern Tamils are likely to be more educated and urbanized, whereas eastern Tamils are often poorer and more rural. Although Karuna seems to have exaggerated the depth of the divide in order to generate the maximum political impact, his comments have highlighted -- and helped widen -- a breach in Tamil society that could have important ramifications, pro and con, for the peace process. END SUMMARY.

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Karuna highlights East vs. North divide  
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2. (SBU) Since his March 3 split with the mainstream leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization (see Reftels), rebel eastern commander Karuna has justified his actions in two major ways. First, he has said that he believes that the LTTE was preparing to end the peace process and start a military offensive -- a policy that he said he opposed. Second, he has vigorously asserted that eastern Tamils have been systematically mistreated by northern Tamils.

3. (U) In making this latter point, Karuna -- and his oft-quoted assistant Varathan -- have variously made the following specific claims:  
-- That there are no eastern Tamils among the LTTE's top 30 officials.  
-- That members of the LTTE from the east have borne the brunt of the group's casualties.  
-- That income from LTTE "taxation" and other funds has not been spread equally between northern and eastern Tamils. (On this point, for example, Karuna has stated that LTTE leaders in the north ride around in "luxury vehicles" while people in the east "are undergoing much hardship.")

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Northern Tamils: A proud group  
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4. (C) In wider societal terms, it is true that there have been long-standing tensions between eastern and northern Tamils. Often from a higher Hindu caste, northern Tamils are likely to be more educated and urbanized, whereas eastern Tamils are often poorer and more rural. Northern Tamils, often called "Jaffna" Tamils due to that city's traditional status as the center of Tamil cultural identity in Sri Lanka, are a proud group. They pride themselves on their relatively high degree of education, as there are numerous schools in Jaffna District, many established by U.S. missionaries in the nineteenth century. Due to their educational standards, many northern Tamils also benefited during British rule, serving as clerks and entering the professions. Northern Tamils, in general, also tend to belong to higher Hindu castes than Tamils from other regions, with a higher percentage of the population hailing from the prestigious "Vellala" caste. (The Vellala caste is the highest among Sri Lankan Hindus. There are very few indigenous Brahmins in Sri Lanka.) Also strengthening the societal position of northerners is the fact that there are many "Jaffna" Tamils in Colombo, who are wealthy and own businesses. Many of the most prominent and wealthy Sri Lankan Tamils who live overseas are also from Jaffna. (FYI. About 23 percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people are Tamil. Of this, 18 percent of the total population is considered "Sri Lankan" Tamil and 5 percent is "tea estate" Tamil. Of the "Sri Lankan" Tamils, about two-thirds are

northerners.)

15. (C) In discussions, northern Tamils will often freely admit to the superior self-image that many members of their community hold. During a March 14 conversation with poloff, Jaffna's Roman Catholic Vicar-General Father Nicholas, lamenting the situation, stated: "When Jaffna people go somewhere, they buy up property and act like little lords, so these feelings of resentment are understandable." In addition, Suresh Premachandran, a Jaffna candidate for the Tamil National Alliance, told polchief on March 15 that "northern Tamils have a sense of entitlement, almost a feeling of birthright, that they should lead Sri Lanka's Tamil community."

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Eastern Tamils: Largely rural  
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16. (C) On the flip side, eastern "Batticaloa" Tamils tend to be more rural and largely poorer than Tamils who are from the north. (Batticaloa town is the major center of Tamil culture in the east.) In eastern Sri Lanka, there are very few institutions of higher learning and Tamil society is mainly a rural one that has been largely isolated from mainstream Sri Lankan society until relatively recently. Eastern Tamils tend to be fishermen or subsistence farmers. Tamils from the east also tend to be from lower castes. A high percentage, for example, are from one of the lowest castes, called "Dhobys," who traditionally wash clothes. Moreover, few of the Tamils living in Colombo or overseas are from the east. All of these factors work to make eastern Tamils feel that they have been disadvantaged compared to their Tamil brethren from the north.

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Tensions are there, but has Karuna Exaggerated them?  
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17. (C) Given the disparity in their relative situations, it is understandable that there would be some tension between eastern and northern Tamil societies. That tension has simmered over the course of generations at a very low level, however. There are no recorded instances of fighting between the two groups, for example. While there have been political disputes that touched on the societal tensions over the years, these disputes have never been that serious.

18. (C) In that sense, Karuna seems to have exaggerated the depth of the divide in order to generate the maximum political effect. While not denying the validity of his specific claims regarding discrimination within LTTE ranks, observers have accused Karuna of working hard to incite eastern Tamils against northerners, so as to buttress his political position in the east vis-a-vis the LTTE. Roman Catholic Bishop of Batticaloa Kingsley Swampillai, for example, told poloff that he felt that Karuna had acted sheerly out of self-interest. He accused Karuna of breaking with the Tigers not out of genuine concern for eastern Tamils, but rather because he (Karuna) wished to be seen as an equal to Prabhakaran.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Although Karuna seems to have exaggerated the depth of the divide for his own reasons, his comments have highlighted -- and helped widen -- the breach in Tamil society. Even if Karuna is eventually undermined by the main LTTE organization, which is a real possibility, his effort to harness eastern resentment against the north will have had an impact. While "Tamil unity" could be restored in a fashion down the road, for example, it is likely that easterners and northerners may never quite fit together again the same way as they did before the split. In the short term, this societal divide could come to complicate the peace process, as eastern Tamils could demand separate representation in peace talks. At the same time, however, if the eastern/northern divide becomes even sharper, "Tamil nationalism" -- the ideology that has fueled the LTTE -- could become a diminished force. This potentially might work to make a settlement of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict easier down the line. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD